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THE RMA AND PEACEKEEPING: CAVEAT EMPTOR

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The phenomenal developments in information and communications technology have generated much discussion of the possible emergence of a "Revolution in Military Affairs" (RMA). Proponents of the Information Technology RMA argue that these new technologies are radically altering the nature of military conflict and that armed forces must be restructured to take advantage of the opportunities that this presents for the future.[1] However, many of the proposals for designing an RMA-centric military, especially the more extreme versions, are highly controversial. Not everyone accepts that a revolution is underway or that technology will prove to be as effective as its supporters claim. This in turn has sparked debate over the implications of the RMA for future defence policy.

Given the centrality of the Gulf War to the development of the Information Technology RMA hypothesis, it is not surprising that the bulk of the debate has been focused entirely on the relevance of the RMA to high-intensity conflicts. However, as warfare is a comparatively rare occurrence, and since armed forces are called on to perform a much broader range of functions, it would be prudent to evaluate the RMA hypothesis without taking operations other than war (OOTW) into account. Peacekeeping is one type of OOTW, involving substantial numbers of troops and resources but conducted according to very different principles and in very different circumstances than traditional war-fighting. Careful examination suggests that the benefits of the RMA will be considerably less applicable to peacekeeping, and may in fact inhibit the conduct of peacekeeping operations (PKOs). It is necessary therefore to approach the calls for radical RMA force restructuring cautiously.

The generally accepted definition of a Revolution in Military Affairs is a major change in the nature of warfare brought about by the innovative application of new technologies which, combined with dramatic changes in military doctrine and operational and organisational concepts, fundamentally alters the character and conduct of military operations. Many strategic analysts and military historians have identified milestones in the history of warfare that could be considered RMAs. These include the introduction of mass armies during the French Revolution, the development of *blitzkrieg* warfare by the Germans prior to World War II, and the invention of nuclear weapons.[2]

The current RMA is being driven by developments in information technology. Its advocates postulate that the systematic use of information technology will enable military forces to gain a complete picture of the battlespace of the future – land, sea, air and space. The real benefits are derived not from specific military technologies but rather from the combination of surveillance capabilities, command, control, communications, computers and intelligence (C^4I), and the precision application of force into an overall "system of systems" that will allow them to destroy their enemies with weapons of exceptional accuracy, as well as greatly reducing civilian casualties and military errors. Furthermore, these technological innovations will allow RMA-centric militaries to conduct operations with considerably less risk to their own personnel and equipment. In order to take advantage of these opportunities, however, military organisations will need to undergo radical changes.

Large conscript armies must be replaced by smaller, highly-trained professional forces. More attention will be devoted to joint operations, breaking down the traditional divisions between army, navy, and air services, as the system of systems requires that all of the components interact with one another. Military hierarchies will be flattened as secure communications networks render some levels of the chain of command redundant. An example would be armoured regiments being spilt up into battlegroups, leaving the regimental commander to act as an advisor to the brigade commander. RMA proponents also argue that the force

structure and budgetary priorities of RMA-centric militaries will need to be very different from those of current military forces. Tanks and aircraft carriers become relatively less important than imaging satellites, stealth bombers and precision-guided munitions (PGMs), since armoured columns and carrier battlegroups have become highly vulnerable to RMA weapons. In addition, the speed of technological development, and the importance of maintaining cutting edge technology, will necessitate increases in the research and development component of defence budgets.

This positive vision of the RMA is not universally accepted. Indeed, many still question the very existence of an RMA, suggesting that the current revolutionary vision is founded too extensively on purely technological changes, without sufficient attention being paid to doctrinal and organisational factors.[3] Many argue that the ultimate potential of technology has been greatly overstated, even among those who accept that an RMA is underway. They point out that sensors can be avoided, jammed, fooled, or simply attacked and destroyed.[4] Moreover, new technologies will create new problems. Rapid communication risks increasing micro-management of operations by the senior military and political leadership, while advanced sensors can bury the one vital piece of information in the mountains of intelligence they produce.

The jury is still out on many of the questions surrounding the ultimate potential of the RMA, and all sides continue to marshal evidence to support their positions. For the most part, the partisans have confined the scope of the debate to the conduct of war. While this is perhaps understandable, given the high profile accorded to technology in the Gulf and Kosovo operations, the RMA will clearly affect other forms of military activity. As the more extreme versions of the RMA call for a radically different force structure that would change the nature of the military forces available for any operation, it is vital to consider OOTW when assessing the merits of the RMA hypothesis.

Peacekeeping operations have become a useful tool for fostering international peace and security. While not specifically provided for in the United Nations Charter, peacekeeping as we know it today was created by the UN Security Council as a response to the challenge of maintaining peace in the Cold War context. By January 1, 2001 54 peacekeeping operations had been established and there were 37,719 military personnel and civilian police serving in the 15 on-going missions.[5]

Originally, PKOs were a response to inter-state conflicts. They consisted of multinational military forces charged with maintaining cease-fire agreements by separating the opposing parties, allowing time for a negotiated settlement to be reached. Peacekeepers were deployed with the consent of all the parties involved in the conflict to preserve an agreement that was already in place. They maintained strict impartiality and used force only in self-defence.

Since the end of the Cold War, peacekeeping operations undergone revolutionary changes in their own right. They are being deployed with far greater frequency, often in response to intra-state conflicts, and are being given drastically expanded responsibilities. In extreme cases, such as the UN missions in Cambodia and East Timor, peacekeepers have effectively taken on the role of national government. These complex operations have necessitated substantial increases in the number of peacekeepers and have also entailed close collaboration with civilian personnel. Operations are now dispatched without the consent of all the conflicting parties and are more frequently resorting to the use of force, which has increasingly called the impartiality of peacekeepers into question.

Despite the increased level of civilian involvement, however, peacekeeping remains a predominantly military activity. It will therefore be affected by the profound transformation of the armed forces as envisaged by the RMA's proponents. Peacekeeping can clearly be strengthened by the organisational changes associated with the RMA. Peacekeeping today is a challenging and complex military operation that would undoubtedly benefit from the more professional and competent RMA soldiers, as many of the failures of current peacekeeping operations are attributed to the poor training of conscript troops. In addition, the diminished importance of heavy armour will result in military forces that are lighter and easier to transport and support logistically, enhancing their ability to deploy rapidly and be sustained over time.[6] Currently it can take months to deploy a peacekeeping operation, during which time the situation on the ground can change radically. These delays permit humanitarian crises to continue unabated, allowing warring parties the time to resume hostilities. In Rwanda, the Arusha Peace Accords of August, 1993 called for the deployment of a peacekeeping force within five weeks. The force was only assembled seven months later, a delay that contributed directly to the mission's failure.[7]

RMA information-gathering systems are also of enormous value to PKOs. Satellite reconnaissance prior to and during an operation can provide invaluable intelligence on terrain features, troop movements, and other local conditions. Sensors and satellites can enhance the observation capacity of peacekeepers, allowing them to monitor a wider area with fewer troops. These benefits were recognised by Kofi Annan himself, during his tenure as Under-Secretary General of Peacekeeping Operations.[8]

Peacekeepers also benefit from improved communications technology. Thanks to technological improvements, the transmission of information between the field and headquarters, as well as between the peacekeeping operation and national governments, is now more rapid, reliable, and secure. A message that would have taken an hour to transmit during the Gulf War can now be sent in less than a second.[9] Communica-

tions technology also facilitates the interaction between peacekeepers and the local population, a key feature in winning its support and in countering disinformation. Public information campaigns are now integral features of complex peacekeeping operations and are strengthened by technological advances. For example, peacekeepers in Cambodia created their own radio station, Radio UNTAC, a public relations measure that was deemed very successful.

Finally, peacekeepers will be able to take advantage of the precision-force weapons of the RMA, as the increased precision will reduce the collateral damage caused by air strikes to an acceptable level. This gives peacekeepers added clout when carrying out their mandates. General Sir Michael Rose has stated that the presence of NATO aircraft had a deterrent effect on the Bosnian Serbs and gave UNPROFOR the confidence to deploy throughout Bosnia.[10]

While at first glance it appears that the organisational and technological changes associated with the RMA offer significant advantages to PKOs, closer inspection reveals several negative aspects of RMA peacekeeping. While the evidence is incomplete, as no armed forces have yet fully transformed into RMA militaries, the emerging trends and the basic facts surrounding peacekeeping as it is currently practised demonstrate that the RMA peacekeeping concept does not live up to its theoretical potential.

While better military training is unquestionably essential for improving peacekeeping performance, RMA-oriented training is not what is required. Conflict resolution, mediation, and negotiation are the skills that must be mastered by peacekeepers, and will not be improved by more technology-focused training. Moreover, many important troop-contributing Third World nations can barely afford to train their armed forces for peacekeeping as it is currently practised, and would be incapable of adapting to the more expensive RMA training model.

Also, while it may physically permit a more rapid deployment of PKOs, the new RMA force structure will not alter the fact that the primary obstacle to their rapid deployment is political. The deployment of a PKO requires time-consuming international negotiations in order to determine the size, composition, and mandate of the force - a process that in most cases requires far more time than that actually needed to deploy.

Information-gathering technology is also of limited assistance to peacekeepers as the politically charged atmosphere surrounding a peacekeeping operation makes even the most inoffensive intelligence-gathering controversial. In the former Yugoslavia, for example, peacekeepers were not even permitted to carry cameras, let alone advanced sensors, without authorisation from the force commander, as even taking photographs could be interpreted as a hostile act.[11] As these advanced intelligence systems are predominantly the preserve of a few advanced Western states, their increased use will force less technologically advanced Third World peacekeeping contributors out of the command and control loop. Such a division of labour risks creating the impression that the RMA powers are attempting to monopolise the leadership elements of peacekeeping while leaving the most dangerous tasks to others.

The apparent ability of the RMA to reduce the number of peacekeepers needed to conduct peacekeeping operations is also fairly limited. The force multiplication effect derived from the "system of systems" is far less effective in a peacekeeping context than in combat. While it may be possible to destroy a building using either a tank or PGMs, peacekeeping involves extensive interaction with the local population. Sensors cannot conduct crowd control and satellites cannot secure routes for food convoys, let alone run government institutions or rebuild entire societies. Moreover, the physical presence of a soldier has a deterrent effect that cannot be matched by unseen sensors or satellites. Reports from the Rwandan operation indicate that the presence of one unarmed military observer at a food distribution centre was sufficient to prevent people from looting the supplies.[12]

Rather than facilitate peacekeeping, the RMA move towards smaller militaries will only exacerbate one of the most challenging aspects of current operations: insufficient numbers of troops. The limited pool of military resources from which peacekeepers can be drawn will diminish even further as countries invest in RMA technologies and cut personnel to pay for them. Even at current troop levels, it is difficult to raise a peacekeeping force and many operations are not fully staffed. Given that RMA militaries will be smaller and more technologically advanced, states are likely to become even more hesitant to commit troops to peacekeeping operations in areas of low or non-existent strategic importance, as even minimal losses of soldiers and equipment would be costly and difficult to replace.

The number of available peacekeepers will also diminish due to RMA interoperability concerns. Multi-national military operations of any kind have always been problematic. The associated difficulties that have not yet been overcome even among sophisticated, long-standing alliances like NATO, are even more pronounced in PKOs where contingents range from NATO members to Third World countries.[13] These problems will be worsened by the RMA and will further undermine the ability of many states to provide peacekeepers.

The new RMA communications technologies are an equally mixed blessing, as they greatly enhance the potential for military micro-management and political interference. This is particularly problematic in PKOs where international tensions are heightened, multiple military commanders and national governments are involved, and political sensitivity to casualties is acute. During the UN operations in Bosnia, the highest levels of government were involved in the tactical decision-making of UNPROFOR.[14] Taken to

its extreme, such micro-management can actually endanger lives. The October, 1993 mission to rescue US troops pinned down in Mogadishu, Somalia was delayed while the national representatives consulted with their governments.[15]

These technologies are only of limited benefit when interacting with the local population. Peacekeeping operations are most often deployed in under-developed countries that lack communications infrastructure and whose populations are largely illiterate. Establishing webpages and using e-mail are therefore rarely effective tools in disseminating information among the masses. The limitations of RMA communications technology in PKOs is perfectly illustrated by Radio UNTAC. A radio station – the most effective way of conveying information to a large number of poor and illiterate people – is hardly cutting edge technology. Even so, the average Cambodian household could not afford a radio and the Japanese government had to donate 350,000 along with 800,000 batteries to make Radio UNTAC an effective tool.[16] Using more advanced – and costly – technologies would clearly have been ineffective.

The ability of peacekeepers to resolve their problems by using precision-force is severely restricted by the very nature of peacekeeping. One cannot bomb people into holding a free and fair election or build an equitable system of justice at the point of a gun. Any effort to do so is likely to simply destroy an on-going peace process. Furthermore, the peacekeeping situations that necessitate the use of force are not easily combated with RMA tactics. Most peacekeeping operations typically confront militias and guerrilla fighters rather than opponents like the Iraqi army, whose heavy armour and fixed military installations are easily identifiable and vulnerable to PGMs and the entire RMA arsenal.[17]

In a recent article by the Vice-Chief of the Defence Staff, it was suggested that the RMA offers important advantages for the Canadian Forces.[18] However, the Vice-Chief also acknowledged that the armed forces must not be oversold on the value of technology and must avoid "throwing the baby out with the bath water." The importance of pursuing a balanced approach to the RMA is strengthened when one considers its impact on OOTW. While it is still too early to make a definitive judgement about the ultimate impact of the RMA upon peacekeeping operations, it will be not be as beneficial as it is purported to be for high-intensity conflict and it will create significant difficulties. In the rush to the future the CF must not lose sight of past lessons and present requirements. A radical force restructuring could create a sophisticated RMA military capable of decisively winning World War III, but that will not be of much use in the interim. The military must be prepared to handle the day-to-day "minutiae" of peacekeeping in addition to being prepared for major war. While it may lack the glamour and excitement of stealth bombers and PGMs, the 50-year old invention of the Blue Helmet has contributed just as much to international peace and security, if not more so. As such, we must be careful of discarding this proven instrument in favour of a shiny new RMA-toy.

ENDNOTES

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2. See for example Williamson Murray, "Thinking About Revolutions in Military Affairs," *Joint Force Quarterly* (Summer 1997): 69-76.
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16. Ingrid A. Lehmann, *Peacekeeping and Public Information: Caught in the Crossfire* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1999): 67.
17. O'Hanlon, *Technological Change*, 129.
18. Vice-Admiral Gary Garnett. "The Canadian Forces and the Revolution in Military Affairs: A Time for Change." *Canadian Military Journal*. Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2001).

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